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Scotland: The Promised Land (Part 2 of 2)

Alan Riach (Friday 5 August 2016)

Last week, we looked at the first programme in the three-part BBC2 Scotland series, “The Promised Land” (series producer Richard Downes, broadcast in March and April earlier this year, available to purchase from BBC Store, and accessible elsewhere online if you search). This week, we’re looking at programmes two and three and asking what all three amount to, taken together. The series as a whole focused on the formation of Scottish identity – or identities – in the aftermath of the First World War, through the 1920s. The first programme looked at the industrial cities of Glasgow and Dundee, centres of population where deprivation, poverty and squalor were rife. Socialist priorities, conservative investments, the weight and momentum of political interests gathering and growing, pulling back in reactionary force, or taking new forms and directions, were all indications of movements happening under the surfaces of what could be seen on the screen. The most important quality of the programme was this sense of vital things taking shape beyond the visible, quantifiable world.

The second and third programmes went further, in quite unexpected ways.

“Homes for Highland Heroes” directed by Andy Twaddle (broadcast 30 March) considered how veterans and their families in the Highlands and Islands were promised land for enlisting to fight in the First World War, and how the promise was broken. The land wasn’t theirs when they returned from the war, prompting the mass emigration of one tenth of the population of the area to Canada and elsewhere. Disappointed and betrayed at home, further betrayals were in waiting. We heard testimonies from emigrants and their descendants who felt that those in authority had not kept their word about the life the exiled Scots would find after they’d crossed the Atlantic.

The programme began with the proposition that the Highlands and Islands of Scotland proportionately lost more of their men in the war than any other part of Britain. After the war, big estates were going bankrupt while crofters were being starved of land. Following one family in Lewis, we heard of a sailor who returned to find the promise of better conditions no more than a cruel deception. When English soap millionaire William Hesketh Lever, Lord Leverhulme, bought the Isle of Lewis and proposed to industrialise the whole crofting community, what might have seemed like progress was quickly understood as attempted dictatorship. The key thing was understood by the residents to be, not a “growing economy” but a relationship with the land. The islanders chose crofting as a way of life over that of capitalism. When, early on January 1 1919, 181 returning ex-servicemen died in the wreck of the “Iolaire” within sight of their home, Leverhulme donated £1,000 in an act of benevolence some would describe as severely limited. Later that year, when the Land Settlement Act ensured the Scottish Board of Agriculture should legislate for new crofts, Leverhulme was

not obliged to observe this law. Landraids followed. About 1,000 crofters confronted the landowner on the bridge over the river Gress, but to no avail. In 1920, Leverhulme pulled out of Lewis, his profits diminished by a trade embargo in the east, following the Russian revolution, and prohibition in America, cutting the profit from sales of salt fish bar snacks intended to encourage a thirst for alcohol. The Soap Lord offered land free but the crofters refused that responsibility, already strained with poverty as they were.

Working men moved south but the economy was collapsing there too and many left Scotland from the industrial cities. The Forestry Commission was established in 1919 but gave limited employment. For the people of the Highlands and Islands, the 1920s was above all a decade of mass departures.

In 1922, the Empire Settlement Act began subsidising one-way tickets to the British “dominions” to the tune of 3 million pounds per annum for fifteen years to come. In the programme, insightful comments were provided by Professors Ewen Cameron (Edinburgh University) and James Hunter (University of the Highlands and Island). Professor Marjory Harper of Aberdeen University (Programme Consultant) pointed out that when the British government began paying Scots to leave there were two major effects: (1) it would bolster the Empire abroad and (2) it would rid home territories of those working men most likely to stir up revolt. In the 1920s, more people (488,000) left Scotland by this means than in any other European country, and the deepest, most widespread, most lasting effect this had was on the Highlands and Islands.

In 1923, whole families left from Barra and Benbecula and South Uist, joining others from Glasgow heading for their “promised land” in Canada. With film from the era, still photographs, quotations from contemporary accounts and maps, the programme tracked two ships and two sets of individuals across generations, from the Outer Hebrides to the North American wilderness. One émigré eventually set up a charter flight operation from Vancouver to Prestwick, knowing that many Scots would want to return home. In 1926, the Clandonald “colony” was established by another. Many of the descendants of the emigrants, still living in Canada, talked movingly of their own memories of their parents’ and grandparents’ conditions, and their own relative prosperity.

But questions and anger remain. Almost every family in Scotland probably has some relative abroad, but whether they prospered or not, might the money spent on sending people away from Scotland have not been better invested in hydroelectric schemes, commercial forestry, industrialisation, repopulating the homeland itself? Why was it not used thus?

The programme concluded that the 1920s were “a time of missed opportunities when the question of who owns Scotland’s land and to what purpose were left to another generation” while “a lack of investment and a lack of imagination had paralysed post-war Scotland”.

That “lack of imagination” is the key phrase here.

Now, in the 21st century, among the present generations of residents, some communities have purchased the land upon which they live and work, in community buy-outs, ending the dominance of the big landowners. Not everywhere, by any means. But it can be done. The programme ended by trailing the final episode of the series, in which “a band of revolutionary writers and artists would mount an explosive rear-guard action to portray their country in a language free from sentimentality, free from tired music-hall parody, a battle for a noble cause to find the voice of Scotland’s people.” This was a regeneration of “imagination” returning at full capacity.

This concluding episode, “The Cultural Revolution” directed by Laura Mitchell (broadcast 6 April), followed the emerging writers and artists such as novelist Lewis Grassic Gibbon, poet Hugh MacDiarmid and sculptor William Lamb. Many served in the war, and all of them campaigned to revive Scotland’s voices and culture at a time when screen media, particularly film, was becoming overwhelmingly popular as a political means of distributing persuasive images of Scottish identity as oddly colourful and politically inept. Where Charlie Chaplin could be subversive and progressive, Harry Lauder confirmed establishment authority and reactionary views of Scottish life. Music hall, comedy, film and later television, persuasively and successfully promoted “Scottishness” as entertainment, while writers, artists, sculptors and composers were thinking more profoundly about the human cost and value involved in a regeneration of national culture. The intention was emphatically “revolutionary”: a real battle was to be fought, not with bombs and guns but with words and ideas. The legacy of these things is still our condition today.

MacDiarmid, as a newspaper reporter in the north-east seaside town of Montrose, covered the unveiling of the local war memorial. Some saw it as “a tribute to those who had fallen for King, Country and Empire” but to MacDiarmid it was “a reminder of wholesale industrialised slaughter in the trenches of the friends and comrades needlessly ordered to their deaths by the British ruling class”.

The programme centred on the activities of people in Montrose, not only MacDiarmid and Lamb but Violet Jacob, Marion Angus, Helen Cruickshank, Compton Mackenzie, Fionn Mac Colla (Tom MacDonald), Willa and Edwin Muir, the composer FG Scott and artist Edward Baird.

Readers of The National will be familiar with most of these characters from my article, “Modernist Montrose” (February 26 2016): there is no need to repeat material from that. Still, crucial to the TV programme were the contributions of a range of scholars, critics and teachers: Dr Paul Maloney (Glasgow University) on the burgeoning popularity of music hall entertainment, pantomime and variety theatre; Dr David Goldie (Strathclyde University) on the conflicts and contradictions in MacDiarmid’s vision and strategies and the example set by Ireland; Professor Douglas Gifford (Glasgow University) on Scottish “popular literature” of the time, persuasive in its bogus instructions about “how to be a good Christian – and know your place” and “establishing social order...within the Empire”; Raymond Vettese, presenting some of MacDiarmid’s sources in Montrose Library; Dorian Grieve, MacDiarmid’s grandson, offering personal reminiscences and shrewd analysis; Maura Currie,

Head of Presentation, BBC Scotland, on John Reith's new radio stations promoting an imperial vision of Britishness through standardised English Received Pronunciation, "the accent of the upper class, the ruling class, the privileged class...a vocal status symbol" with direct access into millions of Scottish homes; Sheila Mann (National Trust for Scotland) on Violet Jacob's Scots poetry; Dr Fern Insh of the William Lamb Studio, showing how Lamb's Rodin-like sculptures developed in style and intensity of purpose after the war; Andy Shanks, teacher, Montrose Academy, who serendipitously discovered the cottage of "Avondale" where MacDiarmid assembled *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) in St Cyrus (surely this demands a blue plaque!); Dr Trevor Griffiths (Edinburgh University) on the mass attractiveness of contemporary cinema culture; Les and Cathie Smith, owners of Helen Cruickshank's house in Edinburgh, the hub of the Scottish Renaissance writers and artists in the 1930s; Dr William K Malcolm of the Lewis Grassie Gibbon Centre, discussing *Sunset Song*. As with the first two programmes, the experts introduced a variety of voices and interpretations that emphasised the plurality of the history represented, intrinsically opposed to the interpretive monopoly "celebrity" presenters often seem to hold. Each one offered insight and provocation.

I mentioned last week that I was "Programme Consultant" on this third episode. When I did that work, the series was provisionally entitled "Wounded Nation". I don't know whose decision it was to rename it "The Promised Land" but it was a good one. Not all the wounds have healed but the promise is still with us. The 1920s saw the lines of demarcation between reactionary forces and progressive aspirations drawn more firmly than at any time in Scotland's history since the 14th century. Those lines are being etched out even more deeply today, in 2016.

These three complementary approaches to 1920s Scotland, moving from the industrial centres of population, to the depopulated Highlands and Islands, and then to the cultural revolution, reflected and illuminated each other in startling ways. The result was an understanding of Scotland in its entirety – not a comprehensive understanding, nor one divided into closed categories but rather one that remained suggestive and open, inviting further explorations. The series delivered the sense that Scotland is created, regenerated, variously, essentially and pre-eminently through these three areas of life: people, geography and cultural practice. And that all three areas draw upon history and experience in ways that often cannot be easily seen, that lead to new and contemporary conditions in ways we might learn more from if we understand them coherently, both intuitively and self-consciously. The series presented Scotland in the 1920s in relation to British and international identities. Contexts and questions were at the core of the whole enterprise, and ran through each episode consistently, and with purpose.

What might TV do if we applied this to every decade since then? A series of three programmes for each of the following eight decades, and into the 2010s? What if we had a series on Scottish painters, sculptors and composers in their full political, geographical and linguistic contexts? Or on the relations between specific locations and writers, over centuries? Imagine a programme on Edinburgh in the works of Dunbar, Scott, Stevenson, Spalding and Sydney Goodsir Smith. Or one on Meg Bateman's Skye and Liz Lochhead's Glasgow?

There's ample material in the archives and no shortage of knowledgeable and personable educationists and artists ready and willing to contribute. How much more good TV could BBC Scotland make? Things change and can be changed. So when we say "Scotland" think what that cultural revolution really brought about.

In his autobiography, *Theme and Variations* (1947), the great conductor Bruno Walter said this: "History! Can we learn a people's character through its history, a history formerly made by princes and statesmen with an utter disregard, frequently opposition to its interests? Is not its nature disclosed rather by its poetry, by its general habits of life, by its landscape, and by its idiom? Are we not able more deeply to penetrate into a nation's soul through its music, provided that it has actually grown on its soil? Is anyone entitled to speak with authority of the Russians who has not become familiar with Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Gorky, and has not listened to the music of Mussorgsky, Borodin, and Tchaikovsky?"

"I have preserved the unshakable conviction that man's spiritual accomplishments are vastly more important than his political and historical achievements. For the works of the creative spirit last, they are essentially imperishable, while the world-stirring historical activities of even the most eminent men are circumscribed by time. Napoleon is dead – but Beethoven lives."

"Scotland: The Promised Land" seems to have started from this premise, without ever neglecting the lives of all the people, and the resources of the non-human geography our infinitely various country offers to us all. Let's never lose sight of it. There's more to be done.

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Next week, John Purser resumes his series on Scottish composers.